

Print – The unsure entertainer

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At the beginning of the twenty-first century, when new media technology is ripping through the human civilization like a hurricane, the existential purpose of the print media has become a conundrum. Its conventional functionality, as the guardian angel of all that matters in a civil society, is being obscured by the onslaught of the other media. Today's global citizen has a wide variety of media choices and contents. Interestingly, he has become both the locus and focus of the origin and destination of all communication making the media and the content producers mere fringe players, often unsure of what they are doing or what they should be doing.

As records show, the historical backdrop of the print media is essentially evangelistic and self-expressive. From the Vulgate Bible to the largest selling newspaper of the world, *Youmuiri Shinbun*, the basic premise is to be public service oriented. The initial struggle for freedom to express becomes the burden of the only existing media — the print. Its obsession to crusade for public issues is well known in the annals of history. At the same time, we cannot ignore the criticisms by reputed scholars who pointed out its weakness to reach out to the masses and in the process lose its way, especially in the West. Consider the trend in the British press of the seventeenth century.

'In 1695, in the UK, the press published the type of news which often pandered to the salacious appetite

of the readership. In the eighteenth century, the British popular press was obsessed with blood and sex, low life, mass slaughter and the scandalous activities of the elite' (Jackie Harrison : 206:55). It is observed that by 1720, more British newspapers were publishing lighter or entertainment news heralding the emergence of trade newspapers (Ibid : 56). The American penchant for converting every invention into a marketable commodity or inventing for the market is self-evident in the appearance of electronic media. As a natural corollary, electronic media concentrated more and more on providing non-stop entertainment to a vast multitude of audience.

Jokerisation of the media

On its arrival, it is often pointed out that electronic media was supposed to relegate the print to a secondary role as illiteracy was rampant across the globe. No doubt, all other media, except the print, were mainly invented to peddle entertainment for the masses, often cheap and vulgar. The unending search for the invisible and massive audience compelled the electronic media to churn out comical contents, leading to jokerisation of the media and the audience as well. All this is happening for the ever-eluding share in the advertising pie, orchestrated by media moghuls like Murdochs, Maxwells and Hefners who control both power and wealth.

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Intra and inter-media competition for advertising revenue has its own repercussions. News media have invariably sought deeper inroads into the advertising market. Jackie Harrison (2006:71) makes a pertinent observation of 'modern news ecology'.

Overall, high levels of competition between news media organizations and the pursuit of profit-maximising strategies have fuelled concerns that the news media are 'dumbing down' (Barnett, 1998:75). It is thought that they are marginalizing analytical news out of peak time schedules and encouraging the growth of tabloid values which changed the focus of news selection away from the 'serious' (politics, public policy, social issues, economics, international affairs to human interest news focused on show business, celebrities, scandal and so on. At the same time, a style of presentation has emerged which has made stories increasingly 'bright, light and trite' (Williams, 2003:230).

Tabloidisation of newspapers

Tabloidisation of newspapers, under the garb of popular journalism, has altered the print mediascape. As already stated, sex, crime and titillation are the hallmarks of such ventures. The primary purpose of this type of journalism is to entertain and cater to the popular taste of lower economic and social groups. In this regard, Daniel Boorstin differentiates between good journalism and bad journalism. For him, 'Good journalism is popular culture, popular culture that stretches and informs its consumers rather than that which appeals to the ever - descending lowest common denominator which provides lack of information, misinformation, disinformation and a contempt for the truth or the reality in most people's lives'. Boorstin also mentions the rampant employment of 'pseudo-events' for this purpose

(Boorstin, 1964: 22:23). Tabloid journalism is a mixture of fact and fiction, 'intrusive, offensive, quasi-pornographic, arrogant, inaccurate, salacious and unprincipled' (Jackie Harrison, 2006: 174). When Rupert Murdoch took over the British newspaper, the Sun, he advised his staff to focus on sex, sports and contents. Is it true that the distinction between entertainment-based and information-based reporting has become spurious?

The separation of information media and news media has been further blurred due to the rapid growth of the Internet. The new medium has offered an unlimited scope for online journalism and web casting. Interactivity and customization have become the buzzwords in media parlance. More so, the declining readership in the West is attributed to the emergence of the e-media. As a result, e-newspapers and e-magazines have started charting their own course in terms of popularity. The impact of new technology upon media contents cannot be easily ignored, what is known in the MacLuhanesque jargon as 'technological determinism'.

From the very inception of the press, newspaper contents were detested by elites and academicians who described such efforts as superficial and devoid of scholarship and depth. The massification of media purposes led to new strategies and content preparations. In its initial years, the press fought for its freedom. However, its quest for more readers led to the adoption of various gimmicks and yellow journalism made its way. We must remember that unlike other media, the print is primarily a medium of news and views. In most democratic countries, the press is a powerful tool to expose the misdeeds of the mighty. In the West, especially in the United States, we have seen a good number of such exposures by the public-spirited newspapers.

Remember the days of New Journalism advocated by Joseph Pulitzer who gave a new dimension to the practice of investigative journalism. However, its execution beyond a permissible level by the rival media house was also a cause of concern as it became synonymous with sensationalism.

In India, prior to Independence, political freedom from the colonial rule was the sole mission. Post-Independence, the objective metamorphosed into money-making and power-wielding. Money bags entered journalism with huge investments and naturally the business motive loomed large for more advertising revenue. Slowly, the Indian press started imitating its Western counterparts.

Impact of television

The impact of television on print is blatantly visible. The content, the language, the visual treatment, colours and more pictorial treatment characterized the new avatar of the print with most dailies turning into broadsheets. Undoubtedly, today's newspapers and magazines are fake replicas of television format. While television prompted post-modernism, the print has not yet come to terms with its surrogate status. Its Hamletian dilemma is clearly apparent. The Page 3 syndrome is the direct manifestation of the soft news peddling religiously practised by the visual medium.

Many analysts inferred that this new tilt of the print was due to the imagined competition from the tube. While the soaps and serials on the television pose a direct challenge to the content structure of print media, the impact of cinema culture on it cannot be ignored. The heroes and heroines of the silver screen commanded a huge fan following and this inevitably compelled the print to promote a dubious tradition of personality cult— all in the name of entertainment. In the guise of infotainment, trivial issues received extra prominence and serious issues were sidelined

(Harivansh 206:31). News has become nominal and the presentation is in the form of non-news contents. The feature style of presentation has erased the distinction between fact and fiction. As remarked by an analyst, journalism has been treated as “an engine for turning everything into a cliché.” (Minogue 1997:7).

Further, narration has embedded itself in audio-visual media. The third person narration has its own merits and demerits vis-à-vis print. As evident, visual narration is more attractive to the common masses than the elitist readership which revels in the imagination or presentation of the author. A fall out of competition from visual media is that the print has adopted a descriptive and elaborate narration technique. The illusory or fantasy function of television is unscrupulously followed by the other media, print being no exception. Less and less text and large pictures are the inseparable components of the new formula. Who knows whether visual literacy is leading us into intellectual illiteracy. More number of pages in a newspaper do not necessarily mean more reading material for the reader. The first change in print media, especially the daily press, could be seen in 1980s with their magazinisation.

In order to compete with the new invaders in the media sector, the audio-visual media, newspapers opted for the magazine format incorporating serials, fictional stories, features, comic strips, caricature and other contents. Some language newspapers even resorted to daily serialization of novels written by reputed authors. This was done to hold back the readership otherwise weaned away by the electronic media. The leisure-pleasure magazine journalism had to seek refuge in specialization for survival. In fact, it was the general-interest magazine sector that was hit hard by the new trend.

The commercialization of mass media has made the print sector, long held as the champion of public sphere values, somewhat uneasy. The sale strategy has made the editorial decisions subservient to the commercial interests. The media control of market forces is considered anathema by stalwarts in journalism. That is why there was always a distinction between news and views. Newspaper editors always confined their views to the editorial columns. Very rarely, a subtle injection of opinion could be seen. Advocacy and campaign dimensions have, of course, made inroads into Indian Journalism these days. Sometimes objectivity is lost to commercial interests. How can there be objectivity in entertainment?

Embedded reporting

The situation further deteriorated with the emergence of embedded reporting— a legacy of the Gulf War as reported by television correspondents. It converted conflicts and war into home entertainment. Viewers all over the world enjoy death and destruction on the television screen. As a matter of fact, violence in any part of the world does not prick our conscience. The Kargil conflict in our own backyard provided an opportunity for media persons, including print, a guided tour of war zone. Perhaps it will not be too long that war between nations will be sponsored by media houses.

Not that print media was totally devoid of entertainment contents since inception. As already noted, when the film medium made waves on the horizon, newspapers and journals began publishing film reviews, production news, curtain-raisers and gossips with regard to the personal lives of actors and actresses that became the staple food of low economic class. Exclusive supplements and magazines devoted to the filmdom appeared in several languages. Publications like the Filmfare and the Screen have a wide readership as well as advertising support. The

Cine Blitz and the Stardust have a different clientele altogether. The contribution of print media in creating and promoting mass hysteria is no less and is a good topic for research. The Sunday supplements of newspapers are a miniature version of general interest magazines with a variety of subjects ranging from short stories, serials, poems, features, humour to pictorial salons. Till recently, they used to devote a substantial amount of space to films and theatre performance. Now, the Friday supplements are meant only for film-related stories and the Sunday extra sheets are virtually literary supplements which contain soft entertainment contents. So much so, the edutainment value of these supplements cannot be under-valued. They are for more leisurely reading than the main sheet contents meant for a quick browsing.

Unlike the other media, the print always played the role of an informer, interpreter and educator. Its political monitoring all through overshadowed its entertainment function. Its editorialisation of issues and events made it a friend, philosopher and guide of the readers. The print was more priestly due to its constant sermonisation and preaching on public affairs rather than an entertainer. The critical analyses of the press made it a constructive opposition to the rulers. In one way, newspapering was a serious business of public service. Even to this day, national newspapers across the world command respect from all quarters.

New readership

The slow conversion of newspaper business into an entertainment industry is also due to the arrival of new readership. With young readers dominating the scene, the change in the contents is to suit their taste. Another added dimension is that the staff in the newspaper industry is also young who perhaps never gel with sermonisation. Because of unbridled competition in the media sector, inaccurate news in

the form of entertainment has been the order of the day. Besides, legal constraints on investigative journalism as well as free operation of the press have pre-supposed its entertainment-orientation, which is true even in the case of mature democracies of the world.

There exists an argument that the shift in the approach of print media towards entertainment is because of cross-media ownership. Combined rates and heavy discounts on advertising invariably seek a large target audience to reach which is possible through the entertainment mode only. The reason is simple. The readers of serious contents are now in a minuscule minority. Especially the younger generation is not interested in the political administration and politics of the country. Their detestation for the political class has been responsible for a paradigm shift in the attitude of the press— from the obsession of politics to the Page 3 syndrome. May be it is true of every other society in the world, for sure.

In all probability, globalization as a factor responsible for this trend cannot be discounted. Technology induced business initiatives have made global mobility a reality, contributing for the young generation to distance itself from realpolitik. On the other hand, it is observed that “.....globalization has a distinctive and new social dynamic in that it places considerable emphasis upon media and communication as central to contemporary social reality. This is hardly surprising given the more general concern of different intellectual currents with the information society, with weightless economics, and with simulacra.

After long being on the margins of social theory, the media are today everywhere accepted as constitutive of social reality in contemporary society (Colin Sparks 2007:132-133). How far this

borderlessness or deterritorialisation has affected the purpose of the existence of print media? In the words of Appadurai, the electronic media have made the audience consumers of global cultural products, unlike the press, limited to its geographical segmentation. The audio-visual media cater to the world markets managed by global media corporations. “To the extent to which these global cultural products have completely eroded national cultures and replaced them with a global culture is much contested. The idea that there is an actually-existing single global culture is sufficiently improbable as to command few or no supporters.” (Smith, 1990) (as quoted by Colin Sparks, 2007:135).

Quite amusing is the fact that language and culture have limited the operational area of the print whereas the electronic media have been able to break these barriers and reach the global audience. The only satisfying dimension for the press is that the technological revolution has made the multi-location delivery system quick and efficient for multi-edition publications. While language is a barrier to global print journalism, the same is not true with the electronic media. The entertainment aspect, in particular, can cross the barrier of language and culture while education cannot disturb the focus of print media.

Advertising in news columns

In order to catch up with the electronic media, the print media has adopted the techniques and strategies of advertising in news columns and vice-versa. Advertorials galore and enticement is the name of the game. Full page multi-colour advertisements have been the norm rather than exception, of late. Almost all English language national dailies in India have accepted this practice. No wonder, the language newspapers also follow in the footsteps of the English counterparts. Commercial messages in print are also a type of entertainment as they use the methods of persuasion. The element of exaggeration lends print

advertisements a fictional narrative dimension, often obscuring their informational value.

Since all media products are cultural in character, the pertinent question is whether the corporatisation of media has led to the corporatisation of culture or whether the reverse is true. The shrinking number of media players and their mega mergers have given rise to super transnational media houses. With the global audience and markets in mind, these media houses have concentrated on Disneyisation of contents. The Western obsession with entertainment has started seeping into developing countries affecting their socio-cultural fabric. It also means the shrinking of public sphere in the media. "By the 'public sphere', we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body". (Habermas J. 1998) (as quoted by Jackie Harrison, 2006:110). We must note here that the public sphere exists between civil society and state.

Entertainment – the only ideology

One important observation of a good number of analysts is the death of ideology in a unipolar world. As long as ideological schisms were there, the press had the opportunity to deliberate serious issues concerning the entire humanity. Now entertainment perhaps has become the only ideology for the media, inclusive of the press. The situation is not far from the truth in the Indian context. Today, in general the English language press (with the exceptions of The Hindu and The Indian Express) represents the interests of the upper middle class, the ruling elite, the 'global village' of the wealthy class. It is this same press that has entrenched the new culture of Page 3 journalism. Fashion, sex, spicy gossip from elite parties, food,

entertainment, pictures of half-clad people, the glamorous life-styles of the rich – these form the content of Page 3. A celebration of the hedonism of the few which ignores the cruel reality of the deprivation of the many. (Harivansh, 2006:34).

By this, should we now accept that the press has gone off-the-track in its service to the public? Definitely there seems a lift towards the supply of more entertainment than before for which reasons have already been adumbrated. The press has a tradition of informing and educating the public. Every now and then, the press encapsulates itself into the ideological mode. It is only in print we can have a lengthy debate on public concerns. For instance, the issue of climate change or the introduction of Bt. Brinjal. Here the ideology of the press was to dissect pros and cons of the issue to educate the people, a great service to humanity indeed. The discussion merited a serious attention of the public. The Indian press in both the cases has acquitted itself with flying colours.

The other one is the repentance mode. Quite often, in order to compensate for its excessive or overkill of sensationalism or entertainment, the press indulges in reporting serious issues, scandals and developmental stories, unlike the electronic media that depend totally on audience patronage. The print has not completely eschewed its societal commitments. Converting readers into markets has, on the one hand, shifted the focus to entertainment and, on the other, it cannot ignore its social responsibilities either. Is it not ridiculous on our part to talk of quality journalism and professional standards when the journalistic values are getting eroded? Which factor decides quality of performance, entertainment or public service? Admittedly, it is the service to the nation.

The developmental role

The developmental role of the press cannot be brushed aside. In multi-linguistic and plural societies,

the communitarian perspective has a prime place. For good or bad, market economy and globalization are fuelled by unending consumerism. Every nation has to consider its options before charting a course to decide its own destiny. The media are partners in national development. One cannot put public priorities in a limbo to satisfy corporate greed. Mahatma Gandhi, speaking of the functions of the press, never mentioned entertainment as one. For print, the days of mass circulation are over. Segmentation of the readership is a reality. Reaching a quality audience with quality journalism must be a priority.

Print, all over the world, has its own tradition of community orientation. It cannot and should not emulate the other media. Considering newspapers as a product and readers as consumers is of a limited view. Journalism is one profession where there is a high dose of social responsibility. For journalists, there cannot be many eluding options. The press has long been hailed as the common man's university. To inform and educate the readership through interpretation will be unavoidable; competition from other media has made the press opt for little more entertainment than ever before. Yet it cannot be a complete entertainer like radio, television or films. It is riven between 'what is' and 'what should be'.

The Indian press has a remarkable resilience to meet the challenges of the media market. We should also know that a developing democracy cannot achieve its goals only through entertainment. An egalitarian society is based on the quality of its intellectual discourses and debates not on tear-jerkers and shoddy soap operas. Mere piped dreams will not provide bread and dignity. Rather the Indian press should opt for a balance between education and expectations. Today's print media is unsure of what its entertainment function is like. Its dilemmas and trilemmas can be seen in the

contents of newspapers. Here it is worth quoting Fred Inglis:

'Journalism, which does exactly what journalism should, is truthful, faithful to the facts, bearing witness of human actuality to those who could not actually be there, and the matching the story with adequate feelings and moral judgement. Doing so, it becomes art.' (Jackie Harrison 2006: 12). An art no doubt is a wholesome entertainment.

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